



FOOD JUSTICE IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA: FROM THE GROUD UP

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Adelaide Showground Farmers Market



Extract from the public forum

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On Feb 23rd 2002 the historic township of Willunga in South Australia, received a metaphorical dose of viagra.

Like its' wonder drug counterpart, the Willunga Farmers' Market was for some in the township, a hard pill to swallow. It represented change, took some time to get used to, and has seen some exciting very early Saturday morning activity.

Willunga is a small township in the heart of the McLaren Vale wine district which is less than 45 minutes from the centre of Adelaide, and ten minutes from some of the State's most beautiful beaches.

Willunga was typical viagra country – middle-aged and with a high percentage of retirees and at a turning point in its history. Established in the 1800's with a streetscape to match, it was bypassed in the 1980's by the Victor Harbour freeway, leaving many of the mainstreet shops vacant in its wake.

So whilst ripe for development, residents and mainstreet traders were concerned about development impact on the rural and historic nature of the town. The High Street still serviced most of the needs of the community with its doctor, dentist, chemist, baker, 2 butchers, Post Office, general store and 2 banks.

Locals had always resisted attempts by supermarket chains to build in the town designated as an historic precinct, and planning regulations supported this resistance.

However, we thought a Farmers Market would provide a source of fresh local produce, build on the community spirit of the town and attract visitors, and only operate for a few hours each week. It seemed like the perfect development option.

But with any new wonder drug there is always the worry of side effects.

So except for an increase in one or two of the resident's bloodpressure when the market plan was unveiled, which I acknowledge could have been fatal in some cases, the establishment of a Farmers Market has proved the ideal medicine for Willunga. It has provided the town with some get up and go and with careful foreplay has stimulated other business' in the town to take the preferred sustainable, economic development road.

As with any new wonder drug, research and development together with informed discussion and education proved the essential key to acceptance of what to some in the community regarded as a threat to their well being.

Passion and demonic enthusiasm by the key drivers of the idea along with an understanding of the perceived threats and underlying fears provided the keys to unlocking local resistance. You have to remember that this was the first Farmers Market in SA and there was very little understanding of what a Farmers Market was in those early days. It represented change.

The project provided the basis for a strategic plan of action involving community participation, a careful marketing campaign and the eventual commitment of producers and customers that has seen the market not only survive but live beyond our wildest dreams in terms of its economic sustainability, small business incubation, increased land under cultivation for the production of food crops, greater primary produce diversity, greater economic activity within the township and the ongoing opening of new business's in the main street. The council have called it "the jewel in their crown" – it delivers in spades on what the bureaucrats like to call "the triple bottom line" – economy, community and environment and the pollies love it!

It has become an established part of the weekly activity of the town, and estimates suggest it injects close to \$1,000,000 dollars a year directly back into the local regional economy, mainly through the pockets of small farmers and producers.

Other community spin offs from the Market have been -

A Visual Feast - A short food film festival held in the open at a local olive grove and a market fundraiser

Eat Your Words - A forum of local food writers held on Market day as part of the SA Writer's Festival held in the region.

The Wilmark Awards - Willunga Farmers Market Oscars equivalent.

Chilli Festival

Community Kitchen the benefits continue to multiply.

Most importantly it has given us a model which we know works, one we used for the set up of the Adelaide Showground Farmers market

Since the Market started a Regional Food Group has developed supported by Food SA and Regional Dev. Boards.

From this has sprung Fleurieu Fiesta – a regional spring celebration of taste and flavour based around the release of the new season's oils and wines but encompassing a range of events that aim to give a taste of the whole region.

A revamped Almond Blossom Festival the region's oldest food festival and the only one to have been based entirely around one crop.

The Forager – The Farmer market newsletter - the first ever regional newsletter based entirely around food.

It acts as the seasonal Farmers Market newsletter and incorporates local, regional and global food news and views that underpin the Market's sustainable food message.

A visiting chef program where chefs demonstrate their skills using market produce at a makeshift kitchen under an umbrella at the market.

Provides an opportunity for work experience in sales customer service, and food production important for many young people in the region who regularly work alongside their parents or are employed to assist stall holders on Market day.

Many young people also busk regularly.

It has led to a Farmers Market Choir being established. We perform music that celebrates community, food and the seasons.

and a new local event called Willunga Walking being established.

The Market has stimulated many local restaurants to include local produce on their menus and the Food group now has a Chef of the region competition as a major event on the Fiesta calendar.

I have lived in this region for more than 25 years. When I first arrived there was only one restaurant –The Barn – which is still going strong, and it was impossible to get a good coffee. There was no food sold at cellar door outlets, and while locals spent a huge amount of time discussing the merits of wine, there was virtually no local lexicon to describe or discuss local food.

Local produce is now firmly on the menu, food is now available throughout the cellar doors of the region, and the winemaking blokes don't cut it any more unless they can cook and cook well, or at least be able to discuss the food of the region.

And all this activity has led to some serious food professionals making the sea change and moving to the region where it is now actually possible to have a life and a family as well as working as a food professional. This in turn is increasing the quality of restaurant fare and upping the anti in efforts to seduce customers.

However I rarely go out to restaurants to eat now. Whether that is an age thing or not I'm not sure, but I know that I prefer to shop at the market and cook for friends and family at home and eat on my balcony overlooking the sea. My neighbours and I often collaborate to cook meals using produce we bought at the market or have grown in our gardens. This to me is the basis of a regional cuisine. Local people growing, buying, cooking and eating close to home according to the seasons.

There are a number of reasons why this Market has been so successful in bringing the community together.

The most important though I believe is the nature of the organization behind it.

When we set it up we were determined that the structure would be a not for profit organisational structure owned and operated by the community for the community. Many of us driving driving the Market project market had all had major family crises around health issues. For us it was a project driven by the quiet

desperation of grief and without which I for one would have found it difficult to get out from under the duna.

We supported each other, over the many hundreds of hours we spent planning the project and maintaining the impetus to drive it, often to the detriment of our own business's.

We were totally driven. That energy is what connected with the community, and drew them into the project. We also delivered on our promises. The community were invited to contribute to the project and thus take ownership by becoming members, which financially underpinned it.

For their faith they were given a 10% discount at every stall. This has given the community a stake in the project and an opportunity to support the broader values that underpin the Farmers Market movement.

And it is exactly this model that has been delivered to the showground. Although it is the city cousin bigger bolder and bit more brassy, the community, having experienced and understood the Willunga model, have embraced the concept in the same way as their country cousins. It is a simple and honest idea that people instinctively recognise as one that has worked throughout history and one they can trust. It effects a human response that helps counteract the despondency many of us feel as we grapple to retain our foodchain.

Food should not be about vitamins, diet or policy. It should not be about share prices or corporate takeovers and it should not be about unreadable nutrition panels or marketing spin. It should be about pleasure.

It is a cultural daily ritual and a celebration of being alive, a reminder that as a species our health is ultimately dependent on the health of our environment to sustain us. If we loose our connection with the natural we loose our ability to survive within it. A daily ritual of eating local, fresh and seasonal provides a food culture framework that by necessity means we need to take care of the environment that nutures us.

Communities that can feed themselves are in reality the only communities that are intrinsically sustainable.